

Child **TRENDS** RESEARCH BRIEF

Publication #2006-10

4301 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 350, Washington, DC 20008
Phone 202-572-6000 Fax 202-362-5533 www.childtrends.org

Men Who Father Children with More Than One Woman: A Contemporary Portrait of Multiple-Partner Fertility

By Cassandra Logan, Ph.D., Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D., Erum Ikramullah,
and Sarah Cottingham

November 2006

Overview. *Multiple-partner fertility is the term that researchers use to describe the pattern of a man or a woman having biological children with more than one partner.^{13,14,17} In the past, this pattern generally occurred because of widowhood or widowerhood and remarriage. Today, however, increases in divorce and childbearing outside of marriage are the main factors contributing to multiple-partner fertility.⁸*

Multiple-partner fertility has potentially negative consequences for men, women, and children. Couples report lower relationship quality and higher conflict in relationships in which either the mother or the father has had children with previous partners.² Having children with multiple partners reduces a person's chances of marriage, especially for women.^{2,12,23} Also, when men have children with more than one woman, it is difficult for men to balance their financial and social responsibilities to more than one family.^{13,14,16} As a result, the children from previous relationships may lose out both socially and economically, as fathers may invest more time and money in the children from their current relationship and reduce child support payments and time spent with their children who live in other households.^{13,14,16}

Using recently released data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, this Research Brief presents a portrait of multiple-partner fertility among men aged 15-44 living in the United States. The brief also examines the types of relationships within which multiple-partner fertility occurs and the links between the characteristics of fathers and multiple-partner fertility.

The results of Child Trends' analyses both support the findings of previous research and provide new information. For example, we found that multiple-partner fertility was more prevalent among certain groups: older men, African-American men (compared with white men and Hispanic men), and men who grew up in households that were not headed by two biological parents. We also found that men were more likely to have children with multiple partners if they had their first sexual experience at a young age, if they fathered their first child at a young age, and if they were neither married to nor cohabiting with the mother of their first child at the time of the child's birth. In addition, we found that multiple-partner fertility often occurred in conjunction with problem behaviors, including incarceration and drug use. Also, our analyses showed that although most fathers with multiple-partner fertility had children with just two partners, men who fathered children with more than one woman had more children, on average, than did fathers of two or more children with the same mother.

PREVALENCE

Although some research suggests that multiple-partner fertility has been increasing,⁸ information on this topic is very limited and the data that do exist come mostly from analyses of men in urban areas. Specifically, most studies conducted on this issue have used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study of low-income married and unmarried couples across 20 U.S. cities. As such, findings from these studies cannot be generalized to the entire U.S. population. Therefore, it is

important to examine the prevalence of multiple-partner fertility using nationally representative data to determine how common this pattern is among the general population, as Child Trends set out to do in this brief. This section highlights our findings about prevalence.

Almost one in 10 men has had children with multiple partners. Figure 1 presents the distribution of children and partners among all males aged 15-44 in 2002. In this group:

ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE FOR THIS BRIEF

All data on fatherhood and multiple-partner fertility reported in this brief were drawn from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG 2002) male data file, collected by the National Center for Health Statistics. The NSFG 2002 is a nationally representative cross-sectional survey (i.e., taken at one point in time) of males and females who were between the ages of 15 and 44 in 2002, with oversamples (i.e., a disproportionately large number) of teens, Hispanics, and non-Hispanic blacks. Child Trends' analyses focused on three samples of the survey respondents: 4,928 men, including those who were fathers and those who were not; a subsample of 1,731 men who were fathers; and a subsample of 316 men who had fathered children with more than one woman and who had available fertility information. Here, children include only biological children (not stepchildren).

The advantage of using the NSFG data file is that respondents were asked about their biological children chronologically and in the context of their relationships with the mothers of these children, allowing biological children to be linked with specific relationships.¹⁸ However, reliance on men's responses to questions about their nonmarital and previous-marriage fertility may pose problems from a research perspective because such responses have been found to be underreported.²⁰ Women were not included in the analyses because the children that they bore were not linked to specific relationships in the data file. All differences presented in this brief are statistically significant ($p < .05$) unless otherwise noted.

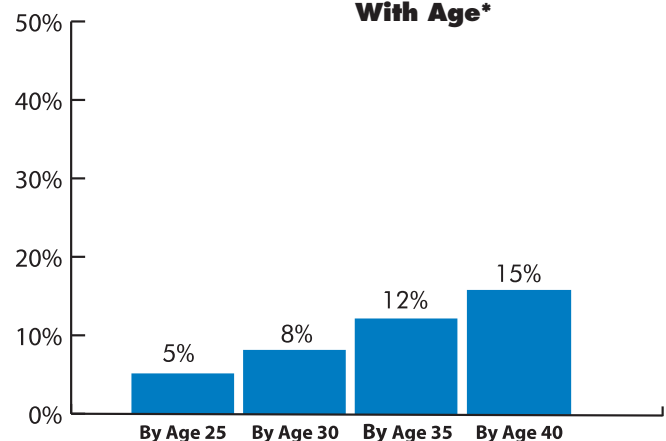
- Nearly one-half (47 percent) had fathered at least one child.
- Thirty-nine percent had had children with a single partner, including 17 percent with one child and 22 percent with two or more children.
- Eight percent had experienced multiple-partner fertility; that is, they had fathered children with more than one mother.
- Among a subsample of men in the study sample who fathered children, 18 percent reported having children with more than one woman (in separate analyses, not shown here).

The proportion of men who have fathered children with more than one woman increases with age. Analyses of data on our study sample of men aged 15-44 suggest that an estimated 5 percent will experience multiple-partner fertility

by age 25 (see Figure 2). This proportion increases to 8 percent by age 30 and 12 percent by age 35. By age 40, an estimated 15 percent (or more than 1 in 7) will have children with more than one woman.

Figure 2

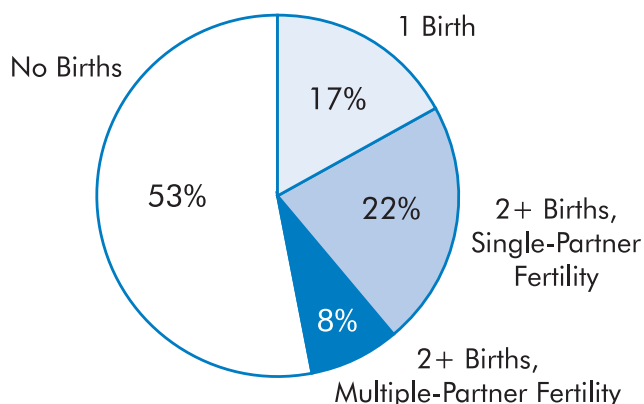
Prevalence of Multiple-Partner Fertility Among Men Increases With Age*



*Based on life-table analysis

Figure 1

Eight Percent of All Men Aged 15-44 in 2002 Have Had Children With Multiple Partners



MARITAL STATUS AND NUMBER OF CHILDREN

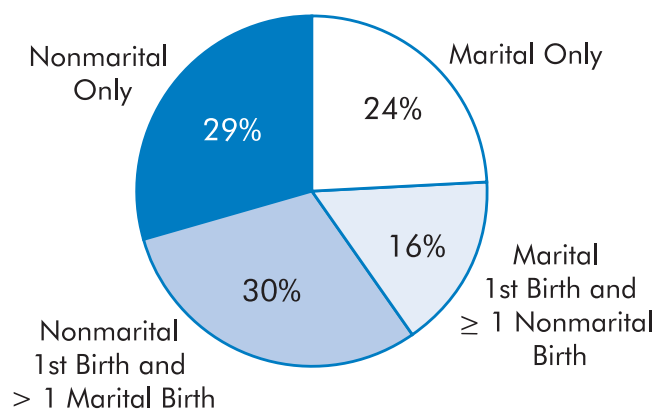
Substantial research has been conducted on stepfamilies and on childbearing within multiple marriages. However, limited research exists about childbearing across several relationships outside of marriage or on childbearing within combinations of marital and nonmarital relationships. This section presents information on the characteristics of men who have had children with multiple partners, including the marital status of these men at the time that each child was born, the total number of

children that they fathered, and the number of partners with whom they had children.

The majority of men who have fathered children with different women were married to at least one of the women involved. Among men who had children with multiple partners, approximately 70 percent were married at the time that one or more of the children were born (see Figure 3). Twenty-four percent only fathered children within marriage; 16 percent first fathered a child within marriage and subsequently fathered a child outside of marriage; and 30 percent first fathered a child outside of marriage and subsequently fathered a child within marriage. Figure 3 also shows:

- The majority of men who experienced multiple-partner fertility were not married when their first child was born (59 percent), including 29 percent who had *only* fathered children outside of marriage.
- Almost one-half (46 percent) of men with multiple-partner fertility fathered at least one child outside of marriage and at least one child within marriage.
- Among just those men who fathered children both within and outside of marriage, one-third had a first child who was born within marriage and two-thirds had a first child who was born outside of marriage (in separate analyses, not shown here).

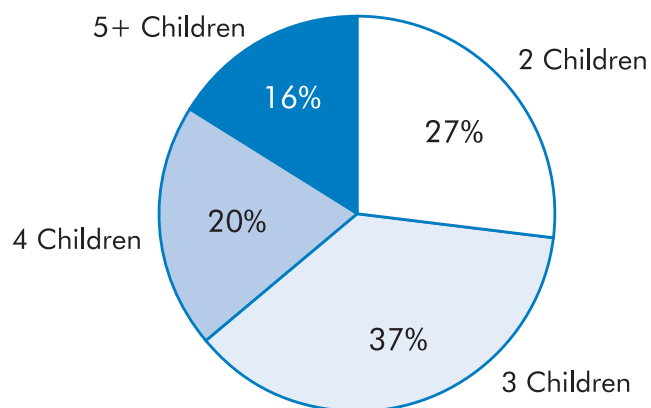
Figure 3 Multiple-Partner Fertility Occurs Within Marital and Nonmarital Unions



On average, men with multiple-partner fertility have more children than do men who have multiple children with the same woman. More than one-third of men (36 percent) with multiple-partner fertility had four or more

children. In contrast, only 18 percent of men who fathered two or more children all with the same woman had four or more children.ⁱ Almost three-quarters (73 percent) of fathers who had children with multiple partners had three or more children, including 37 percent with three children, 20 percent with four children, and 16 percent with five or more children (see Figure 4). Additional analyses (not shown here) found:

Figure 4 Thirty-Six Percent of Men Who Experience Multiple-Partner Fertility Have Four or More Children



- Although men who experienced multiple-partner fertility represented 18 percent of all fathers, these men fathered 28 percent of all children in our study sample.
- Men who had at least two children with multiple women fathered an average of 3.3 children, while men who had at least two children with the same woman fathered an average of 2.7 children. All fathers in the sample had an average of 2.0 children.

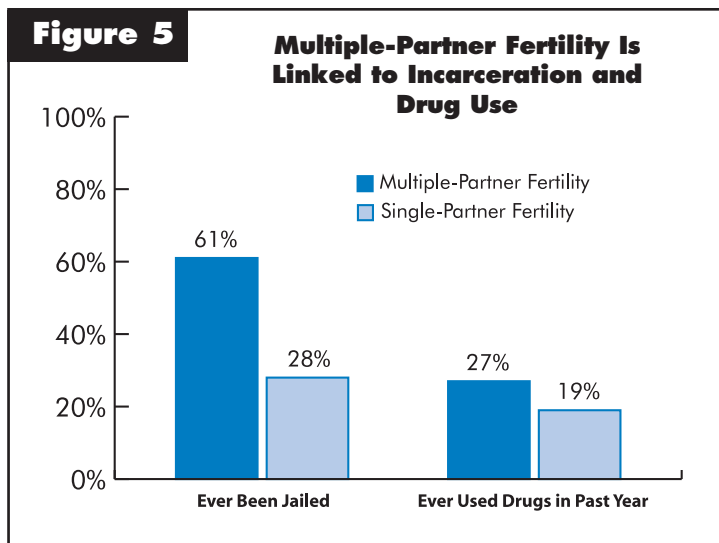
Most men who have children with different women have only had two partners. Approximately 82 percent of fathers who experienced multiple-partner fertility had children with two partners, while 14 percent had three partners, and 4 percent had four or more partners (in separate analyses, not shown here).

ASSOCIATIONS WITH OTHER OUTCOMES AND BEHAVIORS

Multiple-partner fertility may accompany other outcomes and behaviors that could adversely affect families. In these analyses, we examined incarceration histories and illegal drug use within the previous year among men who fathered children with more than one woman, compared with men who

had children with only one partner. It is important to note that while multiple-partner fertility may be associated with some of these behaviors, we were unable to assess a cause-and-effect relationship between these factors.

Incarceration is more prevalent among men who exhibit multiple-partner fertility. Approximately 61 percent of men who experienced multiple-partner fertility had ever served time in prison, compared with 28 percent of men with single-partner fertility (see Figure 5). Our analyses could not determine the relative timing of men's incarceration and fertility.



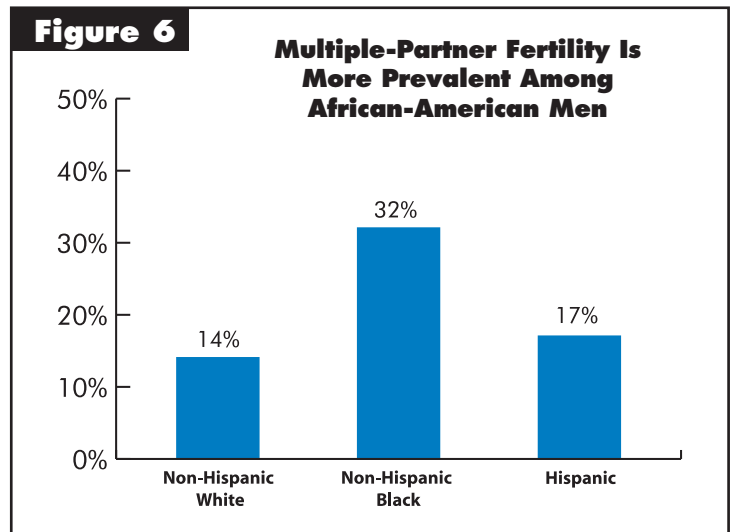
Men who have children with different women are more likely to report that they used illegal drugs in the previous year. More than one-quarter (27 percent) of men who had fathered children with multiple partners used illegal drugs in the previous year, compared with less than one-fifth (19 percent) of men who had had children with only one partner (see Figure 5).ⁱⁱ However, they were no more likely to report frequent binge drinking than were men with single-partner fertility (in separate analyses, not shown here).

INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Understanding the characteristics of men who experience multiple-partner fertility can help to determine who is at greater risk of fathering children with more than one woman.

Multiple-partner fertility varies by race and ethnicity. African-American men are more likely to have experienced multiple-partner fertility than are white or Hispanic men.

- One in three African-American men (32 percent) had children with more than one woman, compared with 17 percent of Hispanic men and 14 percent of non-Hispanic white men (see Figure 6).



Men who grew up in stable households are less likely than men who grew up in unstable households to have children with more than one partner. Fifteen percent of men who lived with both biological parents at age 14 had children with more than one partner. In contrast, 23 percent of men who lived with one biological parent and one adoptive or stepparent and 24 percent of men who lived with a single biological parent at age 14 reported having children with multiple partners. Twenty-eight percent of men who lived in some other type of family structure (with grandparents, for example) at age 14 experienced multiple-partner fertility (in separate analyses, not shown here).

A younger age at the first sexual experience is associated with a greater risk of multiple-partner fertility. One in four men who reported having a first sexual experience before age 15 (27 percent) went on to father children with more than one partner (in separate analyses, not shown here). In contrast:

- Sixteen percent of those who delayed having sex until age 17 reported multiple-partner fertility.
- Those who delayed having sex until age 19 or older were the least likely to experience multiple-partner fertility (6 percent).

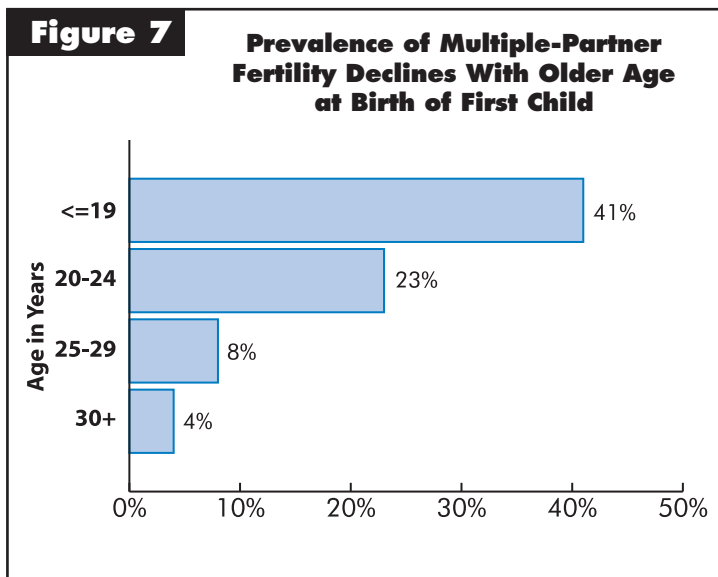
FIRST BIRTH CHARACTERISTICS

We examined whether characteristics associated with the birth of a man's first child—such as his

age and marital or cohabitation status at the time—were connected with having a subsequent child with a different partner.

Two out of five men who fathered a first child before age 20 reported multiple-partner fertility. Mirroring our finding linking an early age at the first sexual experience and multiple-partner fertility, we found that men who were younger when their first child was born were more likely to go on to have other children with different women. That pattern changed as men aged.

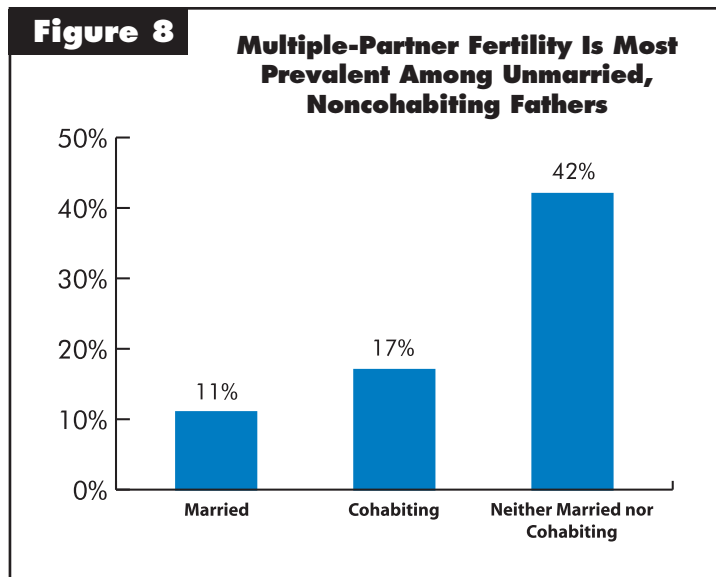
- Among men who were teenagers when their first child was born, 41 percent reported multiple-partner fertility (see Figure 7).
- Almost one-quarter (23 percent) of men who were aged 20-24 when their first child was born experienced multiple-partner fertility.
- In contrast, 8 percent of men who were aged 25-29 and 4 percent of men aged 30 or older when their first child was born had children with more than one partner.



Men who later experience multiple-partner fertility are less likely to have been married or in a cohabiting relationship when their first child was born. As previously noted and as illustrated in Figure 3, multiple-partner fertility varies by marital status, and the majority of men who experience multiple-partner fertility had a first child outside of marriage. As might be anticipated, multiple partner fertility is more likely to occur in unstable unions (See Figure 8).

- Among all men who were neither married nor cohabiting when their first child was born, 42 percent had fathered children with multiple partners by 2002.

- Seventeen percent of men who were in cohabiting relationships when their first child was born went on to have children with a different partner.
- Eleven percent of men who were married when their first child was born experienced multiple-partner fertility.



DISCUSSION

This *Research Brief* has used recently released, nationally representative data to provide information on multiple-partner fertility among men in the United States. This section summarizes our key findings and touches on some of their implications.

An estimated one in seven men will experience multiple-partner fertility by age 40. An estimated 15 percent of men will experience multiple-partner fertility by the age of 40. Note that the prevalence of multiple-partner fertility may be underestimated due to the limited age range (15-44) of men in our analyses and the possibility that men may be unaware of other children that they have fathered, especially children who were born outside of marital or cohabiting unions.^{20,22} The majority of fathers with children by more than one woman had fathered three or more children. Multiple-partner fertility has negative implications for children and is especially problematic for children born in previous relationships, as fathers may invest less time and money in their children who live in separate households.^{14,15,17}

Men with varied relationship histories experience multiple-partner fertility. In our analyses of men who had children with different women, we found that one in four of these men did so only within marriage and more than two-thirds were

married to at least one of the women with whom they had children. However, the remaining one-third of men who fathered children with more than one partner were not married to any of the mothers of their children. Children born within these non-marital relationships may suffer the greatest consequences of multiple-partner fertility because of reduced economic and time resources available from nonresident fathers.^{3,14} Those who have children outside of marriage tend to be more economically disadvantaged than their counterparts who only have children within marriage;^{3,8} and evidence exists that children from single-parent families have poorer educational outcomes and exhibit more problem behaviors than do children from two-parent families.¹¹

These relationship histories influence multiple-partner fertility. Men who have a first child outside of a marital or cohabiting union are more likely to have a subsequent child with a different partner than are men who are married. However, a large proportion of fathers who have children outside of marriage say at the time of the birth, that they want to or plan to marry the mother of their child. Still, these fathers often do not follow through with this intent due to barriers such as lack of financial stability, poor relationship quality, and the fear of divorce.⁷ This finding suggests that programs that are effective at removing barriers to union formation—as well as fostering healthy unions and marriages among young fathers—may help to reduce the prevalence of multiple-partner fertility.

Multiple-partner fertility can be associated with problem behaviors. Although cause and effect have not been determined, men who have ever been incarcerated are more likely to report having children with different women. This association poses problems for children because incarcerated fathers have limited, if any, contact with their children^{5,25} and the families of incarcerated men tend to be unstable.⁶ Limited father contact has been linked to poor child outcomes, including behavior problems and low academic achievement.^{1,9,10,15,19} Moreover, fathers who have been incarcerated are more likely to have low earnings and to have gaps in their income,²⁴ which translate into having fewer resources available to spread among children in various households. In addition, criminal offenders are less likely to marry²⁵ and are more likely to divorce,²¹ while women may be less inclined to marry a man with an incarceration history because it erodes men's economic prospects.²⁶

Multiple-partner fertility occurs disproportionately among African-American men and among men who grew up without two biological parents in the household. The high prevalence of multiple-partner fertility among black men may have contributed to the decline in marriage among African Americans, in that this pattern reduces the probability that black mothers will marry the fathers of their children.¹⁷ Having children with a previous partner diminishes the likelihood of marriage because of the unwillingness of one partner to assume responsibility, especially financial responsibility, for children born outside of the current relationship. This finding is true for both men and women who have had children with a previous partner.^{4,17}

Early sex and childbearing are linked to multiple-partner fertility. Early sexual activity is linked to having a first child at a young age, and men who had sex at an early age or who fathered their first child at a young age are more likely to report multiple-partner fertility. Thus, pregnancy prevention programs that are effective at delaying early sexual activity and an early first birth may also help to reduce the prevalence of multiple-partner fertility.

CONCLUSION

Relatively little research has been conducted about men who have children with different women. Yet this topic merits further study and public discussion, especially given the effects that multiple-partner fertility can have on the well-being of some U.S. children. When men father children with different women, their children often suffer the consequences. Children born under these circumstances are far less likely to receive the support and encouragement that a father can give when he has to spread his attention and resources among multiple households (that is, if he acknowledges his children from multiple relationships at all). Expanding our understanding of factors associated with multiple-partner fertility will help us to identify target groups for interventions, as well as preventive strategies.

This Research Brief was prepared under Grant No. P01 HD045610-01A1, *Transition to Fatherhood*, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The authors are indebted to NICHD for its support of the writing, editing, and production of this Research Brief. We thank members of the *Transition to Fatherhood*

P01 team for their helpful suggestions. We also thank Emily Holcombe at Child Trends for her invaluable research assistance and Fran Goldscheider for her careful review of and helpful comments on this brief.

Editor: Harriet J. Scarupa

ENDNOTES

ⁱSource: Unpublished Child Trends' analyses of 2002 NSFG data

ⁱⁱNote that this is a marginally significant association ($p < .10$)

REFERENCES

- ¹ Bronte-Tinkew, J., Moore, K., Capps, R., & Zaff, J. (2006). Father involvement and youth transition into risky behaviors in immigrant and native-born families. *Social Science Research*, 35(1), 181-209.
- ² Carlson, M., & Furstenberg, F. (2005). *The consequences of multi-partnered fertility for parental resources and relationships*. Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, Washington, DC.
- ³ Carlson, M., & Furstenberg, F. F. (2006). The prevalence and correlates of multipartnered fertility among urban U.S. parents. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 68(3), 718-732.
- ⁴ Carlson, M., McLanahan, S., & England, P. (2004). Union formation in fragile families. *Demography*, 41(2), 237-261.
- ⁵ Edin, K., Nelson, T., & Paranal, R. (2004). Fatherhood and incarceration as potential turning points in the criminal careers of unskilled men. In M. Patillo, D. Weiman, & B. Western (Eds.), *Imprisoning America: The social effects of mass incarceration* (pp. 46-75). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- ⁶ Farrington, D. P. (1989). Early predictors of adolescent aggression and adult violence. *Violence and Victims*, 4, 79-100.
- ⁷ Gibson-Davis, C.M., Edin, K., & McLanahan, S. (2005). High hopes but even higher expectations: The retreat from marriage among low-income couples. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 67(5), 1301-1312.
- ⁸ Guzzo, K., & Furstenberg, F. F. (2006). *Multi-partnered fertility among American men*. Paper presented at the Population Association of America, Los Angeles, CA.
- ⁹ Harris, K. M., Furstenberg, F. F., Jr., & Marmer, J. K. (1998). Paternal involvement with adolescents in intact families: The influence of fathers over the life course. *Demography*, 35(2), 201-216.
- ¹⁰ King, V. (1994). Nonresident father involvement and child well-being: Can dads make a difference? *Journal of Family Issues*, 15(1), 78-96.
- ¹¹ Korenman, S., Kaestner, R., & Joyce, T. J. (2001). Unintended pregnancy and the consequences of nonmarital childbearing. In L. L. Wu, & B. Wolfe (Eds.), *Out of wedlock: Causes and consequences of nonmarital fertility*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- ¹² Lichter, D. T., & Graefe, D. R. (2001). Finding a mate? The marital and cohabitation histories of unwed mothers. In L. L. Wu, & B. Wolfe (Eds.), *Out of wedlock: Causes and consequences of nonmarital fertility* (pp. 317-343). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- ¹³ Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (1999). New families and nonresident father-child visitation. *Social Forces*, 78(1), 87-116.
- ¹⁴ Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (2000). Swapping families: Serial parenting and economic support for children. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 62, 111-122.
- ¹⁵ Marsiglio, W., Amato, P. R., Day, R. D., & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond: Past impressions, future prospects. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 62(4), 1173-1191.
- ¹⁶ Mincy, R., & Huang, C.-C. (2002). The "M" word: The rise and fall of interracial coalitions of fathers and welfare reform. *Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Working Paper #02-07-FF*.
- ¹⁷ Mincy, R. B. (2001). *Who should marry whom?: Multiple partner fertility among new parents*. Paper presented at the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management Research Conference, Washington, DC.
- ¹⁸ National Center for Health Statistics. (2004). *Public use data file documentation: National Survey of Family Growth Cycle 6: 2002, users guide*. Hyattsville, MD.
- ¹⁹ Peterson, J., & Zill, N. (1986). Marital disruption, parent-child relationships, and behavior problems in children. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 62(4), 1269-1287.
- ²⁰ Rendall, M. S., Clarke, L., Peters, H. D., Ranged, N., & Verropoulou, G. (1997). *Incomplete reporting of male fertility in the United States and Britain: A research note*. Unpublished manuscript, Cornell University.
- ²¹ Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- ²² Sorensen, E., & Zibman, C. (2001). Getting to know poor fathers who do not pay child support. *Social Service Review*, 75(3), 420-434.
- ²³ Upchurch, D. M., Lillard, L. A., & Panis, C. W. A. (2001). The impact of nonmarital childbearing on subsequent marital formation and dissolution. In L. L. Wu, & B. Wolfe (Eds.), *Out of wedlock: Causes and consequences of nonmarital fertility* (pp. 344-380). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- ²⁴ Western, B. (2002). Incarceration, wage mobility, and inequality. *American Sociological Review*, 67(4), 526-546.
- ²⁵ Western, B. (2004). Incarceration, marriage, and family life. *Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Working Paper (#05-09-FF)*.
- ²⁶ Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

News You Can Use

Child Trends provides the latest information, indicators, and trends on child and youth well-being. They're just a click away.



www.childtrends.org

www.childtrendsdatabank.org



Child Trends, founded in 1979, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center serving those dedicated to creating better lives for children, and youth. For additional information on Child Trends, including a complete set of available *Research Briefs*, visit our Web site at www.childtrends.org. For the latest information on more than 100 key indicators of child and youth well-being, visit the Child Trends DataBank at www.childtrendsdatabank.org.

© 2006 Child Trends
ISBN 0-932359-34-5



4301 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 100
Washington, DC 20008

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

NONPROFIT
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 1897
Washington, D.C.